DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 881 FL 007 284

AUTHOR Plaister, Ted
TITLE The Eyes May Have It, but What about The Ears? Some Considerations in Teaching Listening Comprehension.
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Conference for the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Los Angeles, California, March 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); Instructional Materials; *Language Instruction; Language Patterns; Language Skills; *Lecture; *Listening Comprehension; Listening Skills; Second Language Learning; *Teaching Methods; Vocabulary

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to the teaching of listening comprehension for English as a second language. Its goals include improving the students' understanding of lectures and lecture-like materials and taking into account the knowledge that the student brings with him to the listening situation. The materials used in this approach consist of a set of lectures dealing with an imaginary subject. The amount of information available to the student is maximized so that he can achieve understanding as soon as possible. The approach is designed to begin with complete information at the students' disposal and to end with a complete withdrawal of all props. The process beings with reading preparation of the materials: the student reads and studies the lecture in question. A dictation follows and three learning aids known as auding prompts A, B, and C are used. With the first, the entire lecture is displayed in print and words redundant in the language are masked. With B and C, the amount of printed information is gradually reduced. The students then listen to the lecture and take notes, and a quiz completes the process. The materials can be used in individualized instruction as well as in regular classroom teaching. (CLK)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED123881

FL007284

The Eyes May Have It, But What About The Ears?

Some Considerations in Teaching Listening Comprehension

Ted Plaister - Dept of ESL
University of Hawaii
1890 East-West Rd
Honolulu, HAWAII 96822

One of the most useful and sensible texts to appear on the ESOL market in recent years is Joan Morley's IMPROVING LISTENING COMPREHENSION, and I am happy to count myself among the ranks of those who applaud her efforts. What I would like to do today is describe for you another approach to teaching listening comprehension; one which I believe supplements and complements Morley's excellent work.

As Patricia Z. Tith's review of Morley in the June 1974 issue of the TESOL Quarterly rightly points out, much of what we call teaching, especially in the area of listening comprehension, is in reality testing and in saying this I admit that there is a grey area on the continuum between teaching and testing where it is difficult to know which you are doing. Nonetheless, I feel that language teachers should be aware of when they are engaged in teaching activities and when they are engaged in testing--at least as best they can.

Listening to and understanding a foreign language involves a whole host of skills and knowledges; some linguistic, some not. One of these is the listener's entire set of understandings. What does the listener bring to the listening situation in terms of his total life experience? Obviously, the ESOL teacher has little or no control over this. Yet a college or university lecturer often assumes a tremendous body of knowledge on the part of his listeners and some of this knowledge can be culturally loaded. Thus, the average foreign student can be at a distinct disadvantage when compared with his native-speaking peers in

listening situations. However, in a subject like chemistry which would appear to be not overly cultural, the foreign student will be able to hold his own. A hydrogen ion is a hydrogen ion no matter what your religious beliefs are, what you eat for breakfast, or what you put on your feet.

As the title of this paper suggests, my concern here is with the improvement of listening comprehension; specifically the understanding of lectures and lecture-like materials. Let me start with vocabulary. It is perhaps trite to point out that every language is made up of words and lots of them. By the time that the non-native English listeners reach our colleges and universities they know a large number of English words, and I believe I am safe in saying that they know more words at the "eye level" than they do at the "ear level". In any given lecture situation these students will be faced with three general types of words: those which are completely strange, those for which there is a nodding acquaintance, and those that are known well. Of the words the students have a casual knowledge of, along with those known well, there is a certain percentage which will be known and recognized at the "eye level" but that will be complete strangers at the "ear level". Thus, there are words which are familiar to the student when in print, but which are quite unfamiliar when turned into speech.

Related to what I have been saying about the problems of print versus speech, is the one of the multitude of morphophonemic changes which occur when language is considered beyond the word level, i.e., at the phrase and sentence level. Similar to the eye/ear phenomenon sketched above, words which are old friends when heard with list pronunciation lose their identity when buried in the syllable collapsing which occurs in normal lecture-style speech.

Language is highly redundant. In any lecture of fifty minute's duration

there will be a considerable quantity of the whole utterance stock which may just as well go in one ear and out the other. And, here a parallel with reading can be drawn. The efficient reader uses, among other things, redundant features of language to improve his total comprehension and reading speed. The efficient listener does likewise. Obviously, an individual cannot speed up his listening due to the fact that the listener is at the mercy of the speaker when it comes to utterance speed. (People can listen to so-called "compressed speech" and understand it, but this is somewhat artificial and something which foreign students will probably not be called upon to do.) If one cannot speed up his listening to a lecture, he can at least learn to separate the meat from the corn. The linguistically insecure listener, as with the inefficient reader, needs training in learning what to attend to and what to ignore. (Unfortunately, there are a few lecturers who defy any listener to sort out the significant and salient while disregarding the trivial.) And so it seems to me that materials for improving listening comprehension should somehow help students learn what is significant in lecture language and what is not.

Unquestionably a knowledge of the grammar of English is a tremendous help when it comes to listening comprehension. The ability to distinguish question forms, often rhetorical in the lecture hall, to handle anaphora and all the other things John R. Bormuth talks about in his article, "An Operational Definition of Comprehension Instruction" (PSYCHOLINGUISTICS AND THE TEACHING OF READING, Kenneth S. Goodman and James T. Fleming, editors.), makes it much easier for a person to understand speech than if he didn't possess these abilities.

To assist a student in understanding the language of lectures, I suppose the ideal teaching:learning situation would be to have a series of lectures on

video-tape which would be readily available for student viewing. Accompanying the series would be a set of instructional materials to help the student understand the lecture material, show him what parts of the lecture were of significance and importance, aid him in taking useful notes for later study, and prepare him for the testing which would ultimately follow. However, this is easier said than done. In the first place, it takes time to lug equipment around, or to set up a special room for taping lectures. Secondly, there is the problem of content. That is, what will be the subject matter of the lectures? Would one want to pick a particular subject like botany and follow through on it, or would it be preferable to sample from across the various disciplines? Thirdly, how does one solve the problem of colleague copperation? And then there is the expense of all the video equipment. The logistics of such a project would seem to be pretty formidable. While I would encourage anyone who has the time, money, facilities and energy to carry through on such an ambitious project, I am willing to settle for something less and something which I think will get the ultimate job done; the improvement of listening comprehension.

I propose to use an ordinary classroom, an ESOL teacher, a set of instructional materials, casette tape recorders and/or a language laboratory. Further, I want to package these materials so that an individual can study on his own without a teacher although studying without a teacher will never be quite as effective as with one.

Let me begin the description of my program with the materials themselves. To get around the problem of "something for everybody"--and by this I mean trying to make a class of mixed academic majors happy--I have created a mythical state situated in Southeast Asia which I call the KINGDOM OF KOCHEN. What I have done is to write a series of lectures about KOCHEN: its agriculture, education, public health, government, religions, transportation, et cetera. Accompanying

the lectures are sets of learning materials which I shall describe in some detail later. Presumably, the lectures about KOCHEN are delivered in the United States, but this wouldn't have to be so. It would be simple enough to imagine the lectures being given anywhere in the world by a speaker of English. By using a contrived situation, I have avoided the difficulty of keeping facts current; things such as prices, who is in power and a whole host of other items which would quickly date the materials. Also avoided are sensitive issues, so that in the lectures about KOCHEN a wide variety of subjects can be touched upon without hurting anyone's feelings. For example, in one lecture the lecturer says that the Queen of Kochen is "quite a gal". This remark might be a little chauvanistic, but there are no Kochenese to take offense at what is actually a complimentary phrase as there might be if the lecturer were talking about Queen Sirikit of Thailand. Using the Kingdom of Kochen as a basis for the materials is a convenience for the materials writer, but I think it is an important one.

Writing lectures for students of ESOL for aural comprehension practice is certainly nothing new. But I submit that if a teacher lectures to students, asks the students to take notes on the material and checks to see how well the students have done, then this constitutes a testing situation rather than a teaching one. It is true, let me add, that the students might learn something from the actual content of the lecture--if they understood it. Thus, I am not denying that learning can take place, but as far as teaching anything about listening comprehension is concerned I would have to argue that no, or very little, teaching has gone on ; only testing. It seems to me that if a student is able to understand a lecture, take adequate notes, and answer questions on the content of the lecture, then nothing has been learned insofar as listening comprehension is concerned. In the ESOL class, I would suggest that such a procedure is a waste of time--the

student has learned nothing; he has merely demonstrated his ability to pass (or fail) the teacher's test. To me, an understanding of this concept is extremely important for all language teachers. What I have tried to do with the KOCHEN materials is something quite different. Teaching comes first; testing follows.

Let me turn now to the actual materials and a discussion of how they are used. In the first place, I have tried to maximize the amount of information available to the student because I want the student to be successful in his understanding. Let me digress a little. Too often in education teachers have a tendency to withhold information from students. Why do we do this? What is our purpose? Is it so that we can appear superior in our knowledge? For an ESOL teacher to resort to this, especially if one is a native speaker of the language, is patently absurd. There are a lot of flaws in my own English, but I am smug enough to believe that any non-native speaker of English who can match me is home free language-wise, consequently I shouldn't hold back anything--I should give all the information I can to my students because I am secure as a native speaker. (I've never had a student catch up with me yet in control of English which probably tells you something about my teaching ability!) Secondly, I want the student to gradually become independent of the learning materials so that he is listening on his own. As a consequence, these materials begin with full and complete information at the student's disposal and end with a complete withdrawl of all props.

What, then, is the design of these materials? Let's say that the theme of the lecture is KOCHEN'S capitol city of Norkhan. The day before the class work begins, the student studies the READING PREPARATION. [VISUAL] This READING PREPARATION is a written paraphrase of the lecture material the student will hear when he comes to the class meeting. The student is instructed to read and study the passage carefully before coming to class so that he is familiar, at least to some extent, with the content of the lecture he is going to hear. Remember, if

you will, that I am not after any surprises. I want the student to understand what he hears. Therefore, when he comes to class he has read about Norkhan and has an understanding of the content he will be listening to. Let me remind you that in a second or foreign language a student may be able to read and understand a passage fairly well yet comprehend but very little of the same passage when he hears it.

The first step in the classroom presentation of these materials is dictation. Approximately 20-25 words are selected for dictation from the lecture that will be heard. These dictation selections are, quite honestly, educated guesses. However, I have no qualms about selecting words on this basis. After one has been in this business of language teaching for a while, he develops a feel for those words which he knows will probably cause difficulty for his students. Of course not all words are of the same order of difficulty for all students but this can't be avoided. And, of course, the classroom teacher could easily adapt my selections to meet the particular needs of a specific class. In the initial dictation each word is dictated at least twice. Following the dictation, the teacher calls for repeats of any of the words the students are not sure of. In my experience, students will ask for roughly 20 per cent of the words to be repeated. Once the dictation has been completed, the teacher says each word again and spells it slowly. As the teacher does this, the student writes each word again to the right of the original writing and checks his answer. Even though a student has gotten a word correct the first time, he is asked to write it again. The students then tally up their correct words and report the number right to the teacher. In my classes, I like to write on the board the number each student gets correct and I do this for psychological reasons. I want to impress upon the students that even though they have already met these words in print and understand them (from the READING

PREPARATION), they are still having difficulty in recognizing these words when they are in spoken form. I also use this method in an attempt to free the students of worry about making mistakes. Admittedly, I ham it up a little bit and congratulate the individual who makes the most mistakes! My ultimate goal is to get the students over being ashamed of making language errors and to concentrate their efforts on learning instead.

After the students have read the READING PREPARATION and the dictation has been given, we are ready to move on to the next phase which involves listening to the actual lecture using a learning aid that I am calling AUDING PROMPT A. I use the word auding primarily because it is short and means the same thing as listening comprehension. I label the learning aid a prompt for the simple reason that that is what it is. There are three such prompts for these materials and the first is A for obvious reasons. In AUDING PROMPT A, the entire lecture is displayed in print for the student if he needs it. However, I have partially masked those words which I feel the students should learn to ignore. [VISUAL] Earlier I reminded you of the considerable redundancy in language and said that both the efficient listener and reader must take advantage of this redundancy. Notice here that what I have done is to block out--but not completely--what I see as the redundant features, the trivia, the asides, and so forth. Now I may err in what I am partially obliterating and I readily admit this is a distinct possibility but in making my obliterations I am using my native speaker intuition, competence, or whatever the "in" term is these days, to do this. I would guess, though, that most of us would mask roughly the same set of words. With AUDING PROMPT A in front of him, the student listens to the lecture delivered by the teacher--or to a tape recording. Notice that the student has maximum information

to work with. There are no secrets. While giving the lecture, the teacher should strive to make it sound as natural as possible. To do this effectively takes a little practice. It is a great temptation just to read the lecture, but what is desired is something a little bit more natural if at all possible.

Depending upon the ability of the class, the teacher may then move on to the use of AUDING PROMPT B, or possibly repeat a couple of more times with AUDING PROMPT A. Let's assume we are working with a fairly advanced class and they are ready to move on to AUDING PROMPT B. [VISUAL] As you can see, what has been done is to remove the words which were formerly marked out and replace each one with a dash equal in length to the number of letters in the word. Thus, there is a resemblance to the cloze procedure. In fact, it should be apparent that I have been strongly influenced by the cloze procedure in the preparation of these materials. As with AUDING PROMPT A, the teacher lectures as many times as is appropriate for the particular class and the students follow along using AUDING PROMPT B.

The next step is the use of AUDING PROMPT C which further reduces the amount of printed information available to the listener, but which still does provide him with essential vocabulary. [VISUAL] By this time, the student should be becoming quite familiar with the content of the lecture and this is exactly what is desired. What I am trying to achieve is what might be called super-understanding. As before, the teacher lectures with the students referring to the prompt.

Following the use of AUDING PROMPT C, the teacher may move on to the use of the NOTES, or possibly might want to repeat the lecture once more for the students with them listening without using any prompts. Or, a teacher might want to paraphrase from the lecture material giving the students a chance to hear the

material in a slightly different form. I'll be touching on this a little later. But let's move on to the notes. [VISUAL] Notice here in this visual that what I have done is to provide the students with a set of notes on the lecture. Let me emphasize once more that I am trying to minimize the testing aspects and maximize the teaching ones. Is this spoon feeding? Perhaps it is, but don't forget that in many situations where non-native speakers of English are taking classwork in ESOL, time is limited and much needs to be done. By taking the approach I am advocating, I feel that what time is available is being used well.

When working from the Notes, one might ask if I am really teaching aural comprehension. I believe I am, at least to a limited degree. What has happened is that I have now moved away from strict listening comprehension in the direction of study skills and I don't think anyone would argue that such skills aren't important for university students. Obviously, the notes a person takes are a very individual and personal thing and this aspect of note-taking is explained to the students. Consequently, the notes I have prepared for these materials are not perfect in any sense of the word, but they are, at least, adequate. So, the students listen to the lecture still another time but this time listening with the aid of a set of prepared notes.

The ensuing step should be obvious: the students are asked to take their own notes. It is at this point that the teacher must be very careful to actually lecture rather than just read the material aloud. My experience has shown that students can get lost if the pace is too fast even though they are familiar with the content. I am not suggesting a word-by-word rendition, but rather one that makes the material sound as natural as possible by interjecting a sigh or two, a

cough, a clearing of the throat, some "let's see's" and the like. After the students have taken their notes, I walk around and look at the notes briefly to see how well they have done. Such things as the use of abbreviations and one's own personal shorthand, including a judicious use of the native language, are all encouraged. In the final analysis, the purpose of notes is to take down pertinent information so that in a sense, taking notes can be looked upon as a kind of selective dictation. The lecturer is dictating his material and the student must decide what is relevant. There are times when he gets help from the lecturer when he uses such words and phrases as, "I want to emphasize", or "Let me stress this", or "You will be held responsible for this on the final" and so on.

The students are then given some time to study their notes and a QUIZ on the material follows. [VISUAL] As before, I am striving for a kind of perfection and so I want all the student to get all of the quiz answers correct. While the students are taking the quiz, I walk around the room and look at their answers. If I find errors (not necessarily of language per se, but of content), I point them out on the spot. If the students are having difficulty understanding the quiz questions--and this is always a problem--I go over the questions with them. As you are undoubtedly aware, students from other cultures are sometimes reluctant to speak up when they are in a testing situation, so I encourage them to ask for an interpretation of test questions if the questions themselves are not understood.

As soon as the quiz has been completed, model answers to the questions are provided and a class discussion ensues over the answers, including such things as how to answer the various types of test questions, short-cuts, the use of outlining in answering questions, and all the rules of the test taking game. [VISUAL] With the conclusion of the discussion on the quiz, the next unit beings with new material about the KINGDOM OF KOCHEN.

While the Kingdom of Kochen exists only in my mind and it might be argued that the students are learning a lot of useless material about a place that doesn't really exist, I would counter by saying that the students are being exposed to lecture-like language and the kind of vocabulary they will need to understand lectures. Furthermore, they are being given practice in learning what kinds of language may be safely ignored, or monitored quickly and ranked according to its degree of importance in the context of a total lecture.

As I mentioned earlier, the materials are designed so that they can be used by an individual working by himself with a casette tape recorder. Moreover, a language laboratory facility can be used along with classroom work. In this connection, I have three paraphrased lectures for each one of the classroom lectures. The paraphrased lectures were recorded extemporaneously from the data contained in the classroom lectures. Listening to these paraphrased lectures constitutes the culminating activity for any unit.

If a teacher has climbed on the individualization bandwagon, he can certainly use these materials. In fact, even in a regular classroom situation, the teacher can have different students listening to the lecture using any one of the auding prompts, or the notes, etc. To take care of the behavioral objectivists, I suppose one could write a set of behavioral objectives in an after the fact manner and tack them on to the materials.

In summary, what has been presented and discussed is a set of materials which, I feel, has considerable flexibility and which will give students a great deal of practice in listening comprehension using language similar to that which they will meet in academic situations. Even if a particular student never finds himself listening to lectures in English, these materials should still be of substantial benefit in improving his overall listening comprehension of English.